DCCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 693 HE 002 098

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TITLE An Evaluation of Two Approaches to the Teaching of Educational Psychology.
INSTITUTION American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Feb 71
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the 55th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, February, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Educational Psychology, Effective Teaching, *Higher Education, *Innovation, *Instructional Innovation, *Student Attitudes, *Student Reaction, Teaching Procedures

ABSTRACT

A 44 item questionnaire and free response instrument was given to 280 students selected from two different kinds of educational psychology courses: (1) a "module" approach involving selection of three 5-week modules from a list of such courses; and (2) a specially prepared composite learning and development course covering 1 semester. The purpose of the questionnaire was to measure students' reaction to the two new teaching procedures. The findings indicated that: (1) "in theory" the students preferred the module approach, (2) "in practice" students preferred the composite 1 semester course, and (3) the outstanding variable contributing to students assessment of relevancy, and teaching procedures, was the instructor. The implications of these findings for innovations in teaching students is also discussed. (Author/AF)

ED049693

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HE002198

* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 1971 (Div. C).

An Evaluation of Two Approaches to the Teaching of Educational Psychology

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Abstract

A 44 item questionnaire and free response instrument was given to 280 students selected from two different kinds of introductory educational psychology courses: (a) A "module" approach involving selection of 3 five-week modules from a list of such courses; and (b) A specially prepared composite learning and development course covering 1 semester. Analysis of the results lead to the following conclusions: (1) "In theory" students preferred the module approach; (2) "In practice" students preferred the composite 1 semester course; (3) The outstanding variable contributing to students assessment of relevancy, and teaching procedures, was the instructor. The implication of these findings for innovations in teaching students is discussed.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to measure students' reaction to two new procedures for the teaching of introductory educational psychology courses.

For some time it has been apparent that many students and instructors have been unhappy about the way courses are organized, and

instruction carried out in the universities. At the University of Wisconsin this has been noticeably true of education courses and of educational psychology courses in particular. In response to faculty and student dissatisfaction and in the light of suggestions by these groups, two new approaches for organizing and teaching introductory educational psychology were devised and put into operation for the fall semester of 1969-70, taking the place of traditionally organized educational psychology courses. The new approaches were: (a) A "Module" approach in which students fulfilled course requirements by selecting 3 five-week modules from a list of such offerings; and (b) A "Composite" learning and development course taking one semester.

This investigation was intended to assess student reaction to these "experimental" courses in terms of their content, relevancy, instructional procedures, and organization. These findings would then be related to ideas, criticisms, and comments made by comparable students who had taken "traditional" courses.

Methods

The Measuring Instrument

A specially prepared 44-item multiple-choice questionnaire was used, plus free-recall comments written by the Ss after they completed the questionnaire. A post-hoc analysis of the questionnaire with a general item analysis program ("Gitap" - Baker, 1966) indicated an item to test reliability of .74. Comparison between the responses to the questionnaire and the written responses combined with S's general comments suggest that the questionnaire was valid in that it covered the evaluation parameters that students tended

to delineate in commenting upon instructional procedures, organization, and content.

Subjects

In the fall semester, a representative sample of 280 undergraduates and graduate students at the University of Wisconsin, taking introductory educational psychology courses, was selected. The sample from the "Module" course contained 54% who were taking the course to fulfill certification requirements; that from the "Composite" course contained 44% taking the course for certification. Comparison of these figures with general statistics for the semester and the preceeding four semesters showed that the sample was representative of normal enrollment of educational psychology courses.

Procedures

The study was conducted at the end of the semester prior to any exams or evaluation procedures. E was not involved in the teaching or organizing of these courses in any way. Ss were instructed to respond to the multiple-choice questionnaire and then asked to write a short paragraph concerning any suggestions, comments, or observations they had regarding the courses.

The written comments were read and scored by 3 independent judges who itemized the concepts discussed in each response and then tabulated these results for each group.

For analysis the 44 items on the questionnaire were separated into 3 categories. Category 1 (Questions 1-9) was designed to ascertain general student information for the purpose of delineating the parameters of the sample population.

Category 2 (Ouestions 10-29) consisted of questions that asked Ss to rate on a 5-point scale their subjective reactions to the following items: (a) Course organization; (b) The evaluation procedures used in the course; (c) The relevancy of the course to the student's own program of studies; and (d) The teaching and instructional methods and manner used by the instructor in the course.

Category 3 (Ouestions 30-44) was made up of questions designed to elicit S response to the subject area of Educational Psychology in general. In addition, there was opportunity for S to indicate areas of special interest or concern within Educational Psychology. As with Category 2, Category 3 used a 5-point scale to elicit S Responses. The scale ran thus: "1 - highly favorable"; "2 - favorable"; "3 - neutral"; "4 - unfavorable"; and "5 - highly unfavorable."

Results

The results of this study are presented in two ways. First, the general overall response of Ss to the two different approaches to teaching educational psychology is illustrated. Second, the responses to some particular questions that seem noticeably important in delineating S satisfaction with a course are examined. The presentation of the data in this manner seems likely to enhance the chances of it being both meaningful and useful to the reader.

Table 1 and Table 2 (see Appendix A) present information from Category 2 of the questionnaire which was that section primarily concerned with evaluating the two instructional approaches: The Module approach and the Composite Course approach. A consideration of Tables 1 and 2 makes it clear that S in response to the questions in Category 2 of the questionnaire responds more favorably to the

Composite Course approach than to the Module approach. It is particularly noteable that Table 2 indicates that the Module approach elicited a far higher unfavorable response from S than was the case with the Composite Course approach.

This general result, showing S responding more favorably to the Composite Course approach than to the Module approach, is sustained when responses to particular items touching upon matters crucial to a S response to an instructional method are considered. The following list of questions and the percentage of favorable responses assigned to the Module approach and to the Composite Course approach illustrate the preference of S for the latter approach.

		Percentage of S responding highly favorably or positively to the question.	
	Question	Module	Composite
(a)	The responsiveness of the lecturer to student questions, suggestions, and interests.	14	84
(b)	Opportunity for personal consultation with lecturer.	04	42
(c)	Opportunity to select areas or topics of particular interest.	15	69
(d)	Did course give an understanding of what educational psychology is about?	39	63
(e)	Should more courses like this be offered to undergraduates?	27	51

Many writers (DeCecco, 1968; White, 1969) have written on the importance of understanding educational research as a necessary part of grasping what educational psychology is about. In this regard both

instructional approaches considered here were reasonably successful in bringing S to an understanding of research. In both the Module and Composite Course approach 70 per cent of S affirmed that they were gaining a knowledge of research. Somewhat less heartening was the fact that only 40 per cent of S in both approaches believed that research was a positive means of obtaining answers to educational problems.

Discussion

There has recently been something of a surge in attempts to find new ways to present material and information in courses at the university level. A characteristic of many of these attempts is that they make some attempt to attend to the wishes of students. Thus, both the instructional procedures dealt with here were innovations created, in part, in response to student criticism of traditional educational psychology courses. The Module approach in particular owed much of its structure to student suggestions and opinions gathered prior to its creation (Grinder, 1970). This concern with consumer satisfaction has recently been criticized by Halstead (1970), but it does not seem unreasonable to make this kind of assessment of new approaches to teaching a subject, such as educational psychology, when many instructors would agree that provided the integrity of the content is not jeapordized then student satisfaction with the course is one of the goals to aim for.

However, this study does point up the folly of paying too close a heed to student suggestions particularly if such suggestions regarding course content and organization are made prior to taking any courses in the subject area. As reported by Grinder (1970), students

enthusiastically endorsed the Modular approach to teaching educational psychology when such an idea was presented to them as an alternative to traditional instructional methods. This study clearly shows that the reality of the module experience fails to match students' expectations. The Module experience is not a happy one for most of the students and few of them found it to be a satisfactory learning experience.

Although it is apparent that the student S in this study preferred the Composite Course approach to instruction over the Modular approach it is plain that the variable of the instructor played a large part in influencing S general assessment of the course and its instructional procedures. This is in no way surprising. Feldhusen (1970a, 1970b), in two papers which explored students' views on educational psychology courses, repeatedly notes the importance that students attach to having their educational psychology instructor fit their expected role of a "good teacher." The fact that students do place such importance on the instructor in their evaluation of a course may necessarily place the Modular approach at a disadvantage. Rosenshine (1970) in a recent paper drew attention to the importance of the effective teacher being perceived by students as a warm, accepting person. If this premise is accepted then it follows that the Modular approach involving as it does short 5-week courses on a single topic with different instructors may well afford significantly less opportunity for student-instructor interaction than does a Composite Course approach. The results of this study were then, perhaps, predictable on the basis of the amount of contact time that a student in each instructional approach could reasonably have with the instructor.

This study points up the difficulties involved in implementing new approaches to the teaching of university courses. It illustrates the weakness of relying upon student preferences when divising new procedures for it is clear that while students may indicate approval of new instructional procedures when they are in the planning stage this in no way guarantees approval in practice. Somewhat depressingly the data from the questionnaire and from the general written comments suggest that although students find the idea of the freedom of choice associated with the Modular approach attractive, in practice they prefer the somewhat more structured Composite Course approach. Certainly students like freedom and loose structure within a course, but they do not, in this study, appear to have much tolerance for loose structure when it exists in the organization of the course per se as is the case with the Modular approach. Ongoing research by Gaite (1971) suggests that this presumed lack of tolerance for loose structure which influences students' evaluation of a course may be related to the students' general anxiety levels.

TABLE 1

Mean percentages of S response on
a 5-point favorable--unfavorable scale
to 19 questions in Category 2 of questionnaire

		Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
Teaching Method	Module	.08	.25	.24	.24	.16
	Composite	.37	.31	.24	.06	.02

TABLE 2

Percentage of favorable and unfavorable* responses

to questions in Category 2 of questionnaire

		Favorable	Unfavorable
Teaching Method	Module	.33	.40
	Composite	.68	.08

* These were obtained by eliminating the neutral response (#3) and summing the responses of highly favorable (#1) and favorable (#2) on the one hand, and highly unfavorable (#5) and unfavorable (#4) on the other.

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